

IN CONVERSATION: RUTH MORGAN ON “HEALTH, HEARTH, AND EMPIRE: CLIMATE, RACE, AND REPRODUCTION IN BRITISH INDIA AND WESTERN AUSTRALIA”¹

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ABSTRACT

In this interview, Ruth Morgan discusses her article, “Health, Hearth and Empire: Climate, Race and Reproduction in British India and Western Australia,” which was first published by *Environment and History* in 2021.²

Philip Gooding (PG): How did you come to the history you describe in your article “Health, Hearth and Empire”? What kind of questions were you trying to answer, what themes were you exploring, and is there a broader project you had in mind when you set out to research and write it?

Ruth Morgan (RM): This article fits into a bigger project, as you suspect. It was a long time in the making, and it didn't necessarily begin as an exploration of gender and race, so much as about demography. What interested me when I was working on my doctoral thesis which later became my book, *Running Out: Water in Western Australia*, was that I kept coming across these references not only to demographic anxieties in Western Australia — there were colonial concerns that the white population were outnumbered —

¹ This conversation was first recorded on the *Indian Ocean World Podcast*. To listen to the whole conversation, see: Sam Gleave Riemann, “Ruth Morgan, ‘Health, Hearth and Empire: Climate, Race and Reproduction in British India and Western Australia,’” *The Indian Ocean World Podcast on Appraising Risk*, (25 Jan 2023): <<https://www.appraisingrisk.com/2023/01/25/ruth-morgan-health-hearth-and-empire-climate-race-and-reproduction-in-british-india-and-western-australia/>>.

² To read the article, see: Ruth Morgan, “Health, hearth and empire: Climate, race and reproduction in British India and Western Australia,” *Environment and History*, 27, 2 (2021), 229-250.

but also constant references to India in these early colonial histories. The references to India just bamboozled me because typically in Australian history we often are more aware of the Pacific orientation of the continent, and there is a real sense that we are a continent that looks to the Asia-Pacific and to the United States. That is partly because most of the Australian population lives on the eastern seaboard, and there are strong historical connections to the Pacific, not least because the Pacific Ocean is where the first British colony, New South Wales, was established. As someone who grew up in Western Australia, I had that kind of other perspective and curiosity about this other history, but it never occurred to me that it was connected to India. I suppose that is a product of an education that was still more about British history than British imperial history.

These constant references in the archive to the colonial history of India, therefore, fascinated me. It wasn't something I could really explore to any great extent in my doctoral work, but I have returned to it. In many ways, I have been interested and inspired by work that my colleague, James Beattie, has done in New Zealand. He has pursued the imperial environmental connections between not only New Zealand and India, but has also looped in Australia, as well as more recently China and the Chinese diaspora. He too picked up on those connections. We both have been interested in seeing how the circulation of people, ideas, animals, and plants have shaped these places. Settler colonies haven't been as separate as we have so often believed. For instance, historiographically, settler colonies like Australia, New Zealand, and Canada aren't often written about in connection with parts of the empire like India. My work explores more closely the connections between British India and Australia. These connections motivated colonial enterprises and fascinated contemporaries. People tried to leverage whatever influence they had on the metropole and in India to see some of their schemes and ideas come to pass. There was, however, a sense of great imbalance with British India being at the hub of the British Empire, and a 'ragtag bunch' of Australian colonies being on the periphery. Australians were aware of this sense, and they worried about their circumstances. They felt incredibly isolated, which is a real streak in Western Australian history and contemporary politics as well. They did anything they could to seek out connection, whether through trade or cultural connection. They were not only in communication with Britain, but also with India, with the colonies in Southeast Asia, and with whatever presence they could reach out to.

As I dug into the demographical population histories in Australia and Western Australia, I realized that concerns about the Anglo population were contemporaneous with studies on the fate of the Indigenous population: these were not happening in isolation.

On the one hand, Britons were trying to come to terms with the impact that they were having on the Indigenous population in the context of the frontier conflict invasion. At the same time, they wondered about themselves and their own fate. Works such as Tiffany Shellam's research on frontier contact between Indigenous Western Australians and British settlers alerted me to Florence Nightingale's interest in the situation and her life as a statistician. Nightingale was interested in the health of British soldiers. While her work in Crimea is well known, she also had this British Indian life. When I found that these things were happening at exactly the same time and knowing how much Western Australia was concerned with what was happening in India, I knew I had to dig deeper.

What has interested me in terms of understanding this Australia-India connection has been that we so often consider them in isolation because the historiography has encouraged this separation of settler colony from other forms of colonization. However, that means that we are not seeing how they are mutually constituting each other, that they were reinforcing the other, and that tropicality needs a contrast. So, what are they contrasting it to? What is it that they want and what is the ideal mode that the tropics are not affording white bodies? That was something I was really interested in exploring, and it is a theme that has occupied historians in South Asia. But what happens when we bring these ideas to Australia? Warwick Anderson and Alison Bashford have considered them in tropical Australia, but what about temperate Australia where most white people ended up living? Exploring answers to these questions have been major themes of my research.

PG: One of the things that is important to the history of Western Australia in the nineteenth century is this idea of British colonists trying to portray it as a sanatorium for the British in India, but especially for British women. How key was this as a strategy to try and ensure the long-term viability of the colony? Or were there other strategies? Can you give a sense of the importance of the sanatorium and therefore also gender dynamics to the early history of European colonization in Western Australia?

RM: It is quite remarkable the way in which they worried about this problem of gender imbalance which emerged in the colony, and that was mostly a result of a lack of migration from the UK to Western Australia. This was mainly because, as is so often the case in histories of the British Empire, the architects of the colony oversold the project: that they misrepresented what colonists might encounter when they arrived would be an understatement. For those of you who have not had the pleasure of exploring Western Australian colonial history, this little outpost on the west coast of Australia was explored

by the British and the French in the 1820s. This area was claimed for Britain around 1827-1828, and the Swan River Colony, which became Western Australia, was founded in 1829. It was sold as an amazing opportunity for free settlers. On the east coast of the continent, Britain had been transporting its unwanted convicts for almost four decades by then, with New South Wales founded in 1788 and then Van Diemen's Land afterwards. There was a big sense that these were very different establishments. This Swan River Colony, Western Australia, was founded on a very different model—these were going to be free people. But when people started to arrive, it was very evident that they were not having a good time. Western Australia was a very sandy, hostile environment, and this was not what the people who were arriving expected. The area was not as well watered as they anticipated: it was hot, it was sandy, and the flies were very upsetting. These were people who expected a lot more comfort. They had set off in the hope of a better life, and they were also quite well to do, so they weren't used to labouring. All these things conspired against their experience.

Word got back to England quite quickly that people were not sure that this was a great place. People wanted to turn around when they got to the Cape Colony. Word got out that they wanted to abort the mission. But some those that did set out made it, soldiered on, and establish themselves on Indigenous land. Of course, though, the circumstances weren't amazing. They just struggled on, and it meant that the population wasn't growing or thriving. Meanwhile, in New South Wales, Tasmania, and Victoria, by the middle of the nineteenth century, transportation of convicts had become out of favour. There was a movement against the transportation of convicts. At that very moment, Western Australia went "here's our opportunity to get some people!" Of course, the people they got were not very desirable. They were male convicts, they were Fenians, and they were the 'riffraff.' For the well-to-do of Western Australia, this was a challenge because it conflicted with their sense of being gentry and of being a free colony. However, it was sold to them through the arguments that it would help them overcome their population problem, provide them with a greater physical or demographic presence, as well as provide cheap labour. As a result of all this, Western Australia ended up with a lot of male convicts, which produced its own social problems and social dynamics. This worried the leading lights of the colony because it did not foster the kind of nuclear family vision that they had. This was not a moral middle class. They worried, not only about what all these single male convicts were doing, but they also worried about their interactions with the Indigenous population, which resulted not only in potentially spreading disease and provoking violence, but also in producing mixed race children. There was also a

movement to get female convicts and female servants, but not in the same numbers. This again was not ideal.

It is with this background in mind that we can better understand the attraction to India: the white people that went to India were better off, they joined the military, they were of a higher class. Australians believed that if they could just attract some of them, even just for a furlough for a few months of a year, that would improve the colony and it would sprinkle some dust of 'civilization' to their remote outpost. That was where the sanatorium came in. They were to attract these, hopefully, British families to spend time in Western Australia. And so, they emphasized the proximity of this one Swan River Colony to India. Rather than having to go back to Britain, you could just go across the Indian Ocean to Western Australia. It was a short trip, and once you bounced back, you would have a great time. Once again, there was a lot of inflation of Western Australia's genteel qualities, and that was where they had to draw on natural characteristics like climate, the temperate environment, the sea breeze, and all these things that were understood to be very salubrious conditions.

This was also where the British women came in. They were concerned about the demographic imbalance because there were many more single men in the colony, whether they were convicts or not. It was believed that women of a certain class were supposed to bring their moral influence to the colony. They were going to be an uplifting, civilizing force for the white population, as well as to some extent the Indigenous population. That was the great attraction. They hoped that if women came to the colony, British men would want to stay. That was part of that kind of settler colonial project: they will stay, and they will most importantly reproduce. They will grow in numbers by having more wombs on the ground, and those children will then beget more children. That was the kind of vision that they had hoped to pursue there.

PG: One of the key themes that you explore in your article is about death, both in British India and in Western Australia. In British India, there were concerns about the deaths of the British colonists, while in Western Australia there were concerns about the deaths of the Indigenous population. In general, the British imperial government blamed death on climate in India, and in Western Australia they blamed death on phenomena related to the civilizing mission. Could you discuss the actual causes of death in these contexts?

RM: In the Western Australian context, the problem for Indigenous people was settler violence, as well as their immunity. This was a people who had not been exposed in any

great degree to the diseases of Europeans. Across the continent, just as in other settler colonies, diseases that were brought into those communities ravaged them, and then venereal disease was added into the mix as well. There were outbreaks of smallpox, tuberculosis, and other dreadful epidemics. Observers among the colonists noted that they were the vectors of these diseases, and they recognized the toll that they were causing on the Indigenous population. They did not, however, see that as a reason to do things differently. They saw that as just an unfortunate byproduct of colonization: that this was just an inevitable part of the story. But the toll was significant. Linda Nash's work discusses this contradiction: if the climate could be healthy and healthful for whites, why then were the Indigenous peoples suffering? The climate reasoning was incredibly malleable, and it could be used in all sorts of interesting and creative ways to suit the purposes of the commentator. Physicians were just as engaged in these kinds of conversations. In the Western Australian context, there was violence and disease ravaging local peoples. The Noongar community, who live in southwestern Australia, could not just move away. This was their country, a place they have lived in for upwards of sixty thousand to seventy-five thousand years. This was not just a matter of moving away and avoiding disease. This was an unprecedented challenge that they had to face. In India, the problems were to some extent much the same. Immunity and disease, including venereal disease, were a huge part of the problem. That was where Florence Nightingale became involved, because she was similarly concerned with the fraternizing of whites and Indians, as well as with the role of prostitution.

Venereal disease became something that was tackled with great gusto. There was the moral issue, but also the disease was weakening the British forces on the ground. They were also bringing it back to the UK. There was both a physical and moral contagion element. In all of that mix, the climate was actually not that strong. In the same way that John McNeil's work has shown with the toll of yellow fever on invading forces in the Americas, it was the British who did not have immunity to some of the diseases they were finding when they went on their colonizing mission around the world. That was a real issue, but it was not because of the tropical climate; it was the diseases they were catching. They had no sense, at this point, that germ theory would possibly be on the cards. This was a time of miasma, and this was a time of going to higher ground to so-called 'sanatoria.' These enclaves not only had conditions which were more amenable to their physiology, but they also had racially distinct zones where they believed they were 'safe' and they could conduct themselves in a particular fashion.

PG: Around this time was there any significant challenge to the climate determinism threat as the key cause for disease? Was climate determinism challenged in official British medical thinking around the mid-nineteenth century at all? If so, how much? Were there other official explanations for deaths at this time and/or did others develop in the aftermath of this? Germ theory was a lot later as you alluded to, but was there a gradual transition to this that we get from British medical investigations in places like Western Australia and India?

RM: My sense is that these people were also trying to grapple with this dilemma as well, because it was defying their understandings. Warwick Anderson points out that although there were those who were committed to the climatic reasoning, there were other physicians who questioned this reasoning. However, they could not yet articulate why the British were not thriving as they should be in these temperate climates, which is where the moral or behavioral element came into this story: that climate alone might not be the only guarantee of your physical health. You should also perhaps consider the foods you're eating, what you're drinking, and who you're fraternizing with. So, there were other kinds of treatments being developed. You can see how that might play into the logics around the spread of venereal disease. If you were practicing temperance, and you were not having too much alcohol, and you were not eating too much meat, and you were not doing certain things, you probably weren't going to get up to mischief that might then lead to these other problems. The moral treatment becomes quite important to make up for the problems they were encountering with their climate reasoning. That becomes another kind of antidote to the conundrums of colonization, and that was evident in both British India and the Australian colonies.

PG: At the beginning of your article, you discuss the 1857 uprising in India, sometimes referred to as the Indian Mutiny or the Indian Rebellion. As opposed to a traditionally political or military approach, you examine the event in terms of climate history. How does the climate historical perspective help us to understand the aftermath of the 1857 uprising?

RM: I examine climate history from a more social or cultural history approach, which is much more qualitative, and which allows for an understanding of health and medicine in terms of climate. In the nineteenth century, health and climate were so entangled. For this particular piece, the challenge was connecting an obscure part of the British Empire with

the larger story. What does this story have to do with the bigger history of empire? There were few moments in the British Empire more significant than this uprising in terms of what it meant for the empire as a whole. It wasn't just about British India, and it wasn't just about what some strange little part of Australia made of it. This event really shook the foundations of the empire. My story does have a link to this, and it's not an accidental link. This was an event that was seized upon by Western Australians, but it was also galvanizing for the architects of British India and for the campaigners that saw this as a moment to reform for themselves. I was also interested in the fact that certain individuals kept popping up over and over again in the strangest of places, which fits in with Tony Ballantyne's work on webs and networks and what they can tell us about the British Empire. These incredibly ambitious people saw empire as an opportunity for their own self advancement, if they could align their own self-interest with the advancement of empire. The Indian uprising was not just a moment of incredible violence that sent shockwaves throughout the empire. In response to this uprising, the British decided to change their governance on the subcontinent to secure their hold on the place. It was no longer the East India Company; they were going to be the Raj, and they were going to station a whole lot more of their white men there. That required a whole different outlook. This was not going to be a light touch model; this was going to be all hands-on deck. That had repercussions for other parts of the empire as well, or at least people wanted it to. To have someone as well-known as Florence Nightingale connecting these places was just such a novelty.

PG: In your article, you cite research published in 2010 to note that gender is still relatively overlooked within this scholarly field, and I think that still persists today. How do you see the field developing in the future, particularly in research focusing on empire and the emotional world? How does gender fit in now compared to 2010, but also how is it moving forward and where will it go next?

RM: I think it is not only important for us to think about including women in our environmental histories, but also by taking a gendered approach you are also thinking about ideas of masculinity, as much as ideas of femininity, as well as interactions between gender and race, and gender and climate, and other identities. These interactions were molded by the colonial presence and its interactions and understandings of the environment. It is such a rich area to explore. In the North American context, Nancy Unger and Virginia Scharff have done strong work with gender and environmental history. In

Australia, we have a great many people who do gender history, but don't necessarily take environment into the mix. Part of the issue is the kinds of themes that we have favoured in environmental history. These have tended to be more typically masculine areas of focus like men's labour in forestry, water management, etc. We have been less interested in the domestic area as a space for environmental history. Perhaps this is changing, and we are seeing an influence from work that is happening in other areas, particularly around race and slavery, and on the role of the body in our histories. Linda Nash was someone that was very much working in that direction in her work, and her work is something to aspire to. The kinds of recognition of the intersections of health and gender and the body is something that we are yet to fully appreciate, and so reproduction naturally becomes part of that story. That is certainly an avenue that we will see more of down the track as people will see that it is not only about interactions with the environment in a sort of landscape-changing way, but it is also about how the environment affects us physically. There has been a slow start on this front, despite the amazing work of many scholars, and there is just so much more that can be done. It is really exciting, and I think that gives us the opportunity to bring the environment into scholarship that hasn't traditionally considered or foregrounded environments in their work. I think it's so easy for us to work in our little clusters with our very familiar work, but the cross-pollination and the results of that is always so innovative and enriching. I really hope that we see more of it in the future.

Transcribed by Lilia Scudamore (IOWC, McGill University)